



## First record of Little Crane *Porzana parva* in The Gambia

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Le 11 décembre 1998 une femelle ou un oiseau de première année de la Marouette poussin *Porzana parva* a été observé dans un marais près de Sapu, Gambie. Ceci représente la première mention de l'espèce pour le pays. Une description de l'oiseau est présentée. Cette observation cadre bien avec l'opinion récente selon laquelle la Marouette poussin hiverne de façon dispersée en Afrique de l'Ouest, et il est possible qu'on la rencontre plus régulièrement en Sénégal.

**D**uring 6 to 21 December 1998, a group from BirdLife Austria, led by Clive Barlow, undertook a birdwatching tour of The Gambia. On the evening of 11 December 1998 we visited a marshy area with extensive reedbeds near Sapu (Central River Division). The central part of this marsh is composed of a closed stand of bulrush *Typha* sp. surrounded by flooded areas, principally of sedge *Carex* sp. The edge of the marsh is heavily grazed by cattle. At the edge of the bulrush, small pools, partially covered with vegetation such as water lilies, were scanned for the different rail species known to be present (eg African Crane *Crex egregia*, Black Crane *Amaurornis flavirostris*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Allen's Gallinule *Porphyrio alleni* and Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*). Soon, we noticed a small crane *Porzana* sp., on some floating leaves. The bird presented three series of extended views in the open before disappearing inside the thick bulrush cover. Identification as a female or first-winter Little Crane *P. parva* was straightforward as all the relevant field marks had been seen well in good light. Several of the 14 observers present had previous field experience of the species in Austria and/or Hungary.

### Description

The following identification criteria were noted. Obviously smaller than Allen's Gallinule and marginally smaller than Black Crane. Structure and coloration were those of a typical small *Porzana* sp. in female or first-winter plumage. Primaries noticeably longer than the tertials and several primary tips visible. Primaries clearly extended beyond the tail, which was almost constantly held cocked. Breast and upper belly pale yellowish brown, and chin and throat whitish. Wings held lowered, thereby concealing the

pattern of the flanks and vent. Lores and ear-coverts very pale yellowish brown; eye dark and supercilium whitish. Crown finely streaked dark. Wings uniform brown (with no white markings or any other discernible pattern), scapulars and tertials black with pale brown fringes and mantle blackish, streaked pale brown and some white. No fine white vermiculations were seen, as in Baillon's Crane *Porzana pusilla*. Short green bill with a darker base and a barely discernible trace of red. Legs greenish.

### Discussion

Little Crane breeds from western Europe (rare and isolated occurrences) across the Western Palearctic to west Xinjiang, north-west China. Due to its secretive behaviour, its wintering areas are poorly known. It winters south of the Mediterranean in northern, western and eastern Africa (south to Kenya and Uganda, with one, single observer, record in Zambia<sup>2</sup>), in parts of Arabia and in southern Asia from Iraq to Pakistan and north-west India<sup>3-7</sup>. However, definite records from this large area are few. In West Africa, the species has been recorded on several occasions along the Sénégal river in September–January<sup>4</sup>, in northern Nigeria in December<sup>8</sup> and southern Niger in September, October and January. It has also been recorded as either a vagrant or an uncommon visitor to Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. There are no previous records from The Gambia<sup>1,3</sup>. This record represents another piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the species' winter range. It is probably not unlikely that Little Crane is a regular winter visitor to remaining suitable habitat in Sénégal and The Gambia, underlining the importance of the safeguarding of such sites in the region. ☺

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## A possible new taxon of rock thrush *Monticola* sp. from the limestone karst region of western Madagascar

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L'observation, en juin 1995, d'un monticole inconnu et de son nid dans la réserve naturelle du Tsingy de Bemaraha, ouest de Madagascar, est décrite. Le plumage du mâle est intermédiaire entre ceux du Monticole de forêt *Monticola s. sharpei* et du Monticole de la montagne d'Ambre *M. s. erythronotus*, taxons récemment traités comme espèces distinctes par plusieurs auteurs. La population de Bemaraha a été découverte en 1994; des observations supplémentaires ont été faites en 1998. Les différences avec *sharpei* et *erythronotus* sont décrites dans une note supplémentaire.

During June 1995, as members of a malacological expedition to the Tsingy de Bemaraha Nature Reserve, an area of limestone karst in western Madagascar, we established a base at the south edge of the reserve by the Manombolo River and close to Bekopaka village. From here we made sorties into the surrounding areas to look for snails but also taking the opportunity to look for birds and explore caves<sup>3</sup>.

Late in the afternoon of 18 June 2 km north of the village of Kinajao, 11 km north-east of Bekopaka (19°24'S 44°48'E) we located a male rock thrush *Monticola* sp. perched on a boulder near the entrance of a cave. The light was poor and we were unable to get good views. Since we were aware that no rock thrushes had been recorded from the reserve<sup>1</sup> and it was outside the known range for all the Malagasy *Monticola* taxa<sup>2,5</sup>, we returned next morning to obtain better views of the bird. We relocated a pair of rock thrushes near to the area of the original sighting. The female was furtive and skulking, being difficult to keep in view for more than brief periods. The male, by contrast, was relatively confiding and perched prominently on bushes and rocks that, to judge by the accumulation of droppings, were regularly used. Both birds were seen at distances down to 2m in good light.

We were able to compare the birds with illustrations and descriptions of rock thrushes in Langrand<sup>2</sup>. The male did not match any of the taxa described, although the female was not, from our observations, separable from those of the Forest Rock Thrush *Monticola sharpei sharpei* and Mt. Amber Rock Thrush *M. s. erythronotus*.

The birds were on the edge of the Tsingy reserve next to the large limestone wall that, at this point, was c40 m high and were frequenting an area of scrub and disrupted canopy forest growing out of a steep boulder field at the base of the cliff.

We kept one or both of the birds in view for most of the two-hour observation period. They kept out of direct sunlight and spent much of the time actively foraging. The male caught a pale green caterpillar, c2.5 cm long, that it beat against a branch before consuming it. A hawk-moth, c5 cm long, was unsuccessfully attacked by the male and both birds were seen to descend to the ground to take small unidentified food items. Both were silent except for a brief quiet warble given by the male.

Two old nests in rocky recesses that we found were believed to belong to this pair. Both were a loose weave of roots and stems lined with leaves. The first nest was c25 cm in diameter and 12.5 cm deep and the